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THE WORK OF THE SOCIETY FOR THE PROPAGATION OF THE GOSPEL IN FOREIGN PARTS AMONG THE NEGROES IN THE COLONIES

The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts was organized in London in the year 1701. During the eighteenth century the British Colonies of the New World constituted the principal field of missionary endeavor for this organization. There were then in North America 250,000 settlers, whole colonies of whom were living in heathenism while others were adhering to almost every variety of strange faiths. The work of proselyting these people was too important to be intrusted to individual enterprise and too extensive to be successfully prosecuted by the heads of the Church only. The ministrations of the Established Church were then limited to a few places in Virginia, New York, Maryland and the cities of Boston and Philadelphia. To supply this deficiency the Society endeavored to use missionaries as a direct means to convert the heathen of all races, whether Europeans, Indians or Negroes. There were cruel masters who objected to the conversion of their slaves,¹ but that any race should be denied the message of salvation because of its color was ever repudiated by the Society. From the very beginning of this work the conversion of the Negroes was as important to the

¹ "An Account of the Endeavor Used by the S. P. G.," pp. 6-12; Meade, "Sermons of Rev. Thomas Bacon," pp. 31 *et seq.*

Society as that of bringing the whites or the Indians into the church. Such dignitaries of the church, as Rev. Thomas Bacon and Bishops Fleetwood, Lowth, Sanderson and Wilson, ever urged this duty upon their brethren at home and abroad.²

The first really effective work of the Society was done in South Carolina. Reverend Mr. Thomas of Goose Creek Parish in that State early instructed the Indian and Negro slaves of his vicinity. He directed his attention to the Negroes in 1695 and ten years later counted among his communicants twenty blacks, who with several others "well understanding the English tongue," could read and write. He further said, in 1705: "I have here presumed to give an account of one thousand slaves so far as they know of it and are desirous of Christian knowledge and seem willing to prepare themselves for it, in learning to read, for which they redeem the time from their labor. Many of them can read the Bible distinctly and great numbers of them were learning when I left the province."³

This work, however, had not proceeded without much opposition. The sentiment as to the enlightenment of the blacks was largely that of the youth who resolved never to go to the holy table while slaves were received there. Others felt like the lady who inquired: "Is it possible that any of my slaves should go to heaven, and must I see them there?"⁴ The earnest workers sent out by the Society, however, did not cease to labor in behalf of the Negroes and the number of masters willing to have their slaves instructed gradually increased. Among these liberal owners were John Morris, of St. Bartholomew's, Lady Moore, Captain David Davis, Mrs. Sarah Baker at Goose Creek, Landgrave Joseph Morton and his wife of St. Paul's, the Governor and a member of the Assembly, Mr. and Mrs. Skeen,⁵ Mrs. Haigue and Mrs.

² Special Report of U. S. Commission of Ed., 1871, pp. 300 *et seq.*

³ *Journal*, Vol. I, May 30, July 18, and Aug. 15, 1707; Special Report of the U. S. Com. of Ed., 1871, p. 363.

⁴ Pascoe, "Classified Digest of the Records of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts," p. 15.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

Edwards. So successful were the efforts of Mrs. Haigue and Mrs. Edwards that they were formally thanked by the Society for their care and good example in instructing the Negroes of whom no less than twenty-seven prepared by them, including those of another planter, were baptized by the Reverend E. Taylor of St. Andrew's within two years.⁶

Other less liberal masters refused to allow their slaves to attend Mr. Taylor for instruction, but some of them were induced to teach the blacks the Lord's Prayer. The result even from this was so successful that there came to the church more Negroes than could be accommodated. So great was their desire for instruction that had it not been for the opposition of their owners, almost all of them would

⁶ In 1713 this churchman wrote his supporters:

"As I am a minister of Christ and of the Church of England, and a Missionary of the most Christian Society in the whole world, I think it my indispensable and special duty to do all that in me lies to promote the conversion and salvation of the poor heathens here, and more especially of the Negro and Indian slaves in my own parish, which I hope I can truly say I have been sincerely and earnestly endeavoring ever since I was a minister here where there are many Negro and Indian slaves in a most pitifull deplorable and perishing condition tho' little pitied by many of their masters and their conversion and salvation little desired and endeavored by them. If the masters were but good Christians themselves and would but concurre with the ministers, we should then have good hopes of the conversion and salvation at least of some of their Negro and Indian slaves. But too many of them rather oppose than concur with us and are angry with us, I am sure I may say with me for endeavouring as much as I doe the conversion of their slaves. . . . I cannot but honour Madame Haigue. . . . In my parish a very considerable number of Negroes . . . were very loose and wicked and little inclined to Christianity before her coming among them I can't but honor her so much . . . as to acquaint the Society with the extraordinary pains this gentle woman and one Madm. Edwards, that came with her, have taken to instruct those negroes in the principles of the Christian Religion and to instruct and reform them: And the wonderful successe they have met with, in about a half a year's time in this great and good work. Upon these gentle women's desiring me to come and examine these negroes . . . I went and among other things I asked them, Who Christ was. They readily answered. He is the Son of God and Saviour of the world and told me that they embraced Him with all their hearts as such, and I desired them to rehearse the Apostles' Creed, and the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer, which they did very distinctly and perfectly. 14 of them gave me so great satisfaction, and were so very desirous to be baptized, that I thought it my duty to baptize them and therefore I baptized these 14 last Lord's Day. And I doubt not but these gentlewomen will prepare the rest of them for Baptism in a short Time." *Journal*, Vol. II, Oct. 6, 1713; A. Mss., Vol. VIII, pp. 356-7; Pascoe, "Digest of Records of S. P. G.," p. 15.

have been converted. "So far as the missionaries were permitted," says one, "they did all that was possible for their evangelization, and while so many professed Christians among the planters were lukewarm, it pleased God to raise to himself devout servants among the heathen, whose faithfulness was commended by the masters themselves. In some of the congregations the Negroes or blacks constituted one half of the communicants." ⁷

This interest of the clergy in the Negroes of South Carolina continued in spite of opposition. Rev. Mr. Guy, of St. Andrew's Parish, said that he baptized "a Negro man and a Negro woman" in 1723, and Rev. Mr. Hunt, minister of St. John's Parish, reported in that same year that "a slave, a sensible Negro, who can read and write and comes to church, is a Catechumen under probation for Baptism which he desires." ⁸ A new impetus too was given the movement about 1740. Influenced by such urgent addresses as those of Dr. Brearcroft, and Bishops Gibson, Wilson and Secker, the workers of the Society were aroused to proselyting more extensively among the Negroes. In 1741 the Bishop of Canterbury expressed his gratification at the large number of Negroes who were then being brought into the church. ⁹

A decided step forward was noted in 1743. That year a school for Negroes was opened by Commissary Garden and placed in charge of Harry and Andrew, two colored youths, who had been trained as teachers at the cost of the Society. This establishment was a sort of training school for bright young blacks who felt called to instruct their fellow countrymen. For adults who labored during the day it was an evening school. It was successfully conducted for more than twenty years. In 1763 the institution was for some unknown reason closed after being conducted in the face of many difficulties and obstructions, although this was the only educational institution in that colony for its 50,000 blacks. ¹⁰

⁷ *Journal*, II, 328; XIV, 48; XX, 132-133; XVI, 165-166.

⁸ *Proceedings of the S. P. G.*, 1723, p. 46.

⁹ Pascoe, "Digest of the Records of the S. P. G.," 16.

¹⁰ Meriwether, "Education in South Carolina," p. 123; McCrady, "South Carolina," etc., p. 246; Dalcho, "An Historical Account of the Protestant Episcopal Church in South Carolina," pp. 156, 157, 164.

Some good results were obtained by the missionaries of the Society of North Carolina, but difficulties were also encountered there. The chief trouble seems to have been that missionaries of that colony were "frustrated by the slave owners who would by no means permit" their Negroes to be baptized, "having a false notion that a christened slave is by law free."¹¹ "By much importunity," says an investigator, Mr. Ransford of Chowan (in 1712) prevailed on Mr. Martin to let him baptize three of his Negroes, two women and a boy. "All the arguments I could make use of," said he, "would scarce effect it till Bishop Fleetwood's sermon (in 1711) . . . turned y^e scale."¹² Mr. Rumford succeeded, however, in baptizing upwards of forty Negroes in one year. In the course of time, when the workers overcame the prejudice of the masters, a missionary would sometimes baptize fifteen to twenty-four in a month, forty to fifty in six months, and sixty to seventy in a year.¹³ Reverend Mr. Newman, a minister in North Carolina, reported in 1723 that he had baptized two Negroes who could say the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and gave good sureties for their further information.¹⁴ According to the report of Rev. C. Hall, the number of conversions there among Negroes for eight years was 355, including 112 adults, and "at Edenton the blacks generally were induced to attend service at all these stations, where they behaved with great decorum."¹⁵

In the Middle and Southern Colonies these missionaries had the cooperation of Dr. Thomas Bray. In 1696 he was sent to Maryland by the Bishop of London to do what he could toward the conversion of adult Negroes and the education of their children.¹⁶ Bray's most influential supporter was M. D'Alone, the private secretary of King William. D'Alone gave for the maintenance of the cause a fund, the

¹¹ Pascoe, "Digest of the Records of the S. P. G.," p. 22.

¹² *Ibid.*, 22.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁴ *Proceedings of the S. P. G.*, 1723, p. 47.

¹⁵ Pascoe, "Digest of the Records of the S. P. G.," p. 22.

¹⁶ Smyth, "Works of Franklin," V, 431.

proceeds of which were first used to employ catechists, and later to support the Thomas Bray Mission after the catechists had failed to give satisfaction. At the death of this missionary the task was taken up by certain of his followers known as the "Associates of Dr. Bray."¹⁷ They extended their work beyond the bounds of Maryland. These benefactors maintained two schools for the benefit of Negroes in Philadelphia. About the close of the French and Indian War, Rev. Mr. Stewart, a missionary in North Carolina, found there a school for the education of Indians and Negroes conducted by "Dr. Bray's Associates."¹⁸

Georgia too was not neglected. The extension of the work of Dr. Bray's associates into the colony made an opening there for taking up the instruction of Negroes. The Society joined with these workers for supporting a schoolmaster for Negroes in 1751 and an improvement in the slaves was soon admitted by their owners.¹⁹ In 1766 Rev. S. Frink, a missionary toiling in Augusta, found that he could neither convert the Indians nor the whites, who seemed to be as destitute of religion as the former, but succeeded in converting some Negroes.²⁰

In Pennsylvania the missionary movement found less obstacles to the conversion of Negroes than to that of the Indians. In fact, the proselyting of Negroes in the colony was less difficult than in some other parts of America. The reports of the missionaries show that slaves were being baptized there as early as 1712.²¹ About this time a Mr. Yeates, of Chester, was commended by the Rev. G. Ross "for his endeavors to train up the Negroes in the knowledge of religion."²² Moved by the appeal of the Bishop of London, other masters permitted the indoctrination of their slaves in the principles of Christianity. At Philadelphia the Rev. G. Ross baptized on one occasion 12 adult Negroes, "who

¹⁷ Wickersham, "History of Education in Pennsylvania," p. 249.

¹⁸ Bassett, "Slavery and Servitude in North Carolina," p. 226.

¹⁹ *Journal*, Vol. XI, pp. 305 and 311.

²⁰ Pascoe, "Digest of the Records of the S. P. G.," p. 28.

²¹ *Journal*, Vol. XVII, p. 97.

²² *Ibid.*, II, 251.

were examined before the congregation and answered to the admiration of all who heard them. . . . The like sight had never been seen before in that church.”²³ Rev. Mr. Beckett, minister in Sussex County, Pennsylvania, said in 1723 that he had admitted two Negro slaves and that many Negroes constantly attended his services.²⁴ The same year Rev. Mr. Bartow baptized a Negro at West Chester.²⁵ Rev. Mr. Pugh, a missionary at Appoquinimmick, Pennsylvania, said, in a letter written to the Society in 1737, that he had received a few blacks and that the masters of the Negroes were prejudiced against their being Christians.²⁶ Rev. Richard Locke christened eight Negroes in one family at Lancaster in 1747 and another Negro there the following year.^{26a} In 1774 the Rev. Mr. Jenney reported that there was “a great and daily increase of Negroes in this city who would with joy attend upon a catechist for instruction”; that he had baptized several, but was unable to add to his other duties; and the Society, ever ready to lend a helping hand to such pious undertakings, appointed the Rev. W. Sturgeon as catechist for the Negroes at Philadelphia.²⁷ The next to show diligence in the branch of the work of the Society was Mr. Neill of Dover. He baptized as many as 162 within 18 months.²⁸

The operations of the Society did not seem to cover a large part of New Jersey. The Rev. Mr. Lindsay wrote of the baptizing of a Negro at Allerton in 1736.²⁹ The reports from the missions of New Brunswick show that a large number of Negroes had attached themselves to the church. This condition, however, did not obtain in all parts of that colony. Yet subsequent reports show that the missionary spirit was not wanting in that section. The baptism of black

²³ *Journal*, IX, 87.

²⁴ *Proceedings of the S. P. G.*, 1723, p. 47.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 1737, 50.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1737, p. 41.

^{26a} *Pennsylvania Magazine of History*, XXIV, 467, 469.

²⁷ Pascoe, “Digest of the Records of the S. P. G.,” p. 38.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

²⁹ *Proceedings of the S. P. G.*, 1736.

children and the accession of Negro adults to the church were from time to time reported from that field.³⁰

The most effective work of the Society among Negroes of the Northern colonies was accomplished in New York. In that colony, the instruction of the Negro and Indian slaves to prepare them for conversion, baptism, and communion was a primary charge oft repeated to every missionary and schoolmaster of the Society. In addition to the general efforts put forth in the colonies, there was in New York a special provision for the employment of sixteen clergymen and thirteen lay teachers mainly for the evangelization of the slaves and the free Indians. For the Negro slaves a catechizing school was opened in New York City in 1704 under the charge of Elias Neau. This benevolent man, after several years' imprisonment because of his Protestant faith, had come to New York to try his fortunes as a trader. As early as 1703 he called the attention of the Society to the great number of slaves in New York "who were without God in the world, and of whose souls there was no manner of care taken"³¹ and proposed the appointment of a catechist to undertake their instruction. He himself finally being prevailed upon to accept this position, obtained a license from the Governor, resigned his position as elder in the French church and conformed to the Established Church of England, "not upon any worldly account but through a principle of conscience and hearty approbation of the English liturgy."³² He was later licensed by the Bishop of London.

Neau's task was not an easy one. At first he went from house to house, but afterwards arranged for some of the slaves to attend him. He succeeded, however, in obtaining gratifying results. He was commended to the Society by Rev. Mr. Vesey in 1706 as a "constant communicant of our church, and a most zealous and prudent servant of Christ, in

³⁰ Pascoe, "Digest of the Records of the S. P. G.," 55.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 56.

³² *Ibid.*, 57, and "Special Report of U. S. Com. of Ed.," 1871, 362; and "An Account of the Endeavors Used by the S. P. G.," pp. 6-12.

proselyting the miserable Negroes and Indians among them to the Christian Religion, whereby he does great service to God and his church.”³³ Further confidence in him was attested by an act of the Society in preparing at his request “a Bill to be offered to Parliament for the more effectual Conversion of the Negro and other Servants in the Plantations, to compell Owners of Slaves to cause children to be baptized within 3 months after their birth and to permit them when come to years of discretion to be instructed in the Christian Religion on our Lord’s day by the Missionaries under whose ministry they live.”³⁴

Neau’s school suffered greatly in 1712 because of the prejudice engendered by the declaration that instruction was the main cause of the Negro riot in that city. For some days Neau dared not show himself, so bitter was the feeling of the masters. Upon being assured, however, that only one Negro connected with the school had participated in the affair and that the most criminal belonged to the masters who were openly opposed to educating them, the institution was permitted to continue its endeavors, and the Governor extended to it his protection and recommended that masters have their slaves instructed.³⁵ Yet Neau had still to complain thereafter of the struggle and opposition of the generality of the inhabitants, who were strongly prejudiced with a horrid motive thinking that Christian knowledge “would be a means to make the slave more cunning and apter to wickedness.”³⁶ Not so long thereafter, however, the support of the best people and officials of the community made his task easier. Neau could say in 1714 that “if the slaves and domestics in New York were not instructed it was not his fault.”³⁷ The Governor, the Council, Mayor, the Recorder and the Chief Justice informed the Society that Neau had performed his work “to the great advancement of religion in general and the particular bene-

³³ Pascoe, “Digest of the Records of the S. P. G.,” p. 58.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, *Journal*, I, Oct. 20, 1710.

³⁵ “Special Report of U. S. Com. of Ed.,” 1871, p. 362.

³⁶ Pascoe, “Digest, etc.,” p. 59.

³⁷ *Journal*, III, Oct. 15, 1714.

fit of the free Indians, Negro slaves, and other Heathens in those parts, with indefatigable zeal and application.”³⁸

Neau died in 1722. His work was carried on by Mr. Huddleston, Rev. Mr. Whitmore, Rev. Mr. Colgan, Rev. R. Charlton, and Rev. S. Auchmutty. From 1732 to 1740 Mr. Charlton baptized 219 slaves and frequently thereafter the number admitted yearly was from 40 to 60.³⁹ The great care exercised in preparing slaves for the church was rewarded by the spiritual knowledge which in some cases was such as might have put to shame many persons who had had greater advantages. Rev. Mr. Auchmutty, who served from 1747 to 1764, reported that there was among the Negroes an ever-increasing desire for instruction and “not one single Black” that had been “admitted by him to the Holy Communion” had “turned out bad or been in any shape a disgrace to our holy Profession.”⁴⁰

The interest in the enlightenment of Negroes too extended also to other parts of the colony. In 1737 Rev. Mr. Stoupe wrote of baptizing four black children at New Rochelle.⁴¹ Mr. Charlton had taken upon himself at New Windsor the task of instructing these unfortunates before he entered upon the work in New York City. At Staten Island too he found it both practical and convenient “to throw into one the classes of his white and black catechumens.”⁴² Rev. Charles Taylor, a schoolmaster at that place, kept a night school “for the instruction of Negroes, and of such as” could not “be spared from their work in the day time.”⁴³ Rev. J. Sayre, of Newburgh, followed the same plan of coeducation of the races in each of the four churches under his charge.⁴⁴ Rev. T. Barclay, an earnest worker among the slaves in Albany, reported in 1714 “a great forwardness” among them to embrace Christianity

³⁸ Humphreys, “Historical Account of the S. P. G.,” 243.

³⁹ Pascoe, “Digest, etc.,” p. 65.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁴¹ *Proceedings of the S. P. G.*, 1737.

⁴² Pascoe, “Digest, etc.,” p. 68.

⁴³ *Proceedings of the S. P. G.*, 1723, p. 50.

⁴⁴ *Journal*, XIX, 452-453.

“and a readiness to receive instruction.”⁴⁵ He found much opposition among certain masters, chief among whom were Major M. Schuyler and his brother-in-law Petrus Vandroffen. Sixty years later came the report from Schenectady that there were still to be found several Negro slaves of whom 11 were sober, serious communicants.⁴⁶

These missionaries met with more opposition than encouragement in New England. The Puritan had no serious objection to seeing the Negroes saved, but when the conversion meant the incorporation of the undesirable class into the state, then so closely connected with the church, many New Englanders became silent. This opposition, however, was not effective everywhere. From Bristol, Rev. J. Usher wrote in 1730 that several Negroes desired baptism and were able “to render a very good account of the hope that was in them,” but he was forbidden by their masters to comply with the request. Yet he reported the same year that among others he had in his congregation “about 30 Negroes and Indians,” most of whom joined “in the public service very decently.”⁴⁷ At Newtown, where greater opposition was encountered, Rev. J. Beach seemed to have baptized by 1733 many Indians and a few Negroes.⁴⁸ The Rev. Dr. Cutler, a missionary at Boston, wrote to the Society in 1737 that among those he had admitted to his church were four Negro slaves.⁴⁹ Endeavoring to do more than to effect nominal conversions, Doctor Johnson, while at Stratford, had catechetical lectures during the summer months of 1751, attended by many Negroes and some Indians, as well as whites, “about 70 or 80 in all.” And said he: “As far as I can find, where the Dissenters have baptized 2, if not 3 or 4 Negroes or Indians, I have four or five communicants.”⁵⁰ Dr. Macsparran conducted at Narragansett a class of 70 Indians and Negroes whom he frequently catechized and in-

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, January 21, 1715.

⁴⁶ Pascoe, “Digest of the Records of the S. P. G.,” p. 67.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁴⁹ *Proceedings of the S. P. G.*, 1737 and 1738, p. 39.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

structed before the regular service.⁵¹ Rev. J. Honyman, of Newport, had in his congregation more than 100 Negroes who "constantly attended the Publick Worship."⁵²

It appears then that the Negroes were instructed by the missionaries in all of the colonies except some remote parts of New England, Virginia and Maryland. The Established Church had workers among the white persons in those colonies but they did not always direct their attention to the slaves. This does not mean, however, that the slaves in those parts were entirely neglected. There were at work other agencies to bring them to the light. And so on it continued until the outbreak of the Revolution, when the work of these missionaries was impeded and in most cases brought to a close.

C. E. PIERRE

⁵¹ *Proceedings of the S. P. G.*, 1723, 51.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 1723, p. 52.